

?Our greatest fear is to send somebody away with nothing?



Each Wednesday, more than 100 people come through the parking lot of Trinity Anglican Church to pick up a hot meal.

For some visitors at Welcoming Arms, an ecumenical organization that lends a hand to residents in need, including their Welcome Table food program, it is their one balanced meal of the day. For others, it can be the first food they've had that week.

But, as inflation rises, the organization's tireless volunteers are seeing more people than ever come through the program ? but it's a trend that can only be sustainable for so long.

?It's my greatest fear that we don't have enough food and we would have to send somebody away with nothing,? says Allison Collins-Mrakas, a Welcome Table team lead and member of the Welcoming Arms Executive Council.

In recent weeks, visitors who have picked up food through the Welcome Table program have averaged between 160 and 170 each Wednesday evening and while these numbers ebb and flow, overall they are up over 15 per cent, according to Executive Council Chair Doug Steele.

Should numbers regularly exceed 175, that could leave them at capacity.

?Inflation is draining our resources,? says Steele. ?It hasn't changed any of our output but it is draining our bank account. We have to step up our fundraising and that is really the bottom line, but the issue now is people are tapped out from donating and, guess what, their cost of living has gone up too, so they have to adjust to how they give to charities. We just have to manage our way through this.?

A recent source of help has been the Hoedown Community Fund, an initiative set up to support local charities in lieu of the annual Magna Hoedown, a party that has, until the start of the global pandemic, raised approximately \$500,000 each year for local charities.

30 non-profits will split the pot this year and Welcoming Arms' share will help cover 15 weeks of Welcome Table meals.

?That money will literally feed thousands,? says Collins-Mrakas.

Adds Steele: ?It's huge, but a few years ago that would have covered 20 weeks.?

Inflation and the rising cost of living is just the latest challenge faced by organizations like Welcoming Arms and Welcome Table.

At the start of the global pandemic, their meal program was shuttered for six weeks. The shutdown was very difficult for Welcome Table's dedicated team of volunteers because they knew their visitors would be left hungry. But, as soon as they could, they re-tooled their programs from an in-door sit-down meal to a walk/drive-thru format to keep people safe.

“There are many different kinds of things that can have a significant impact on operations,” says Collins-Mrakas. “We've been slapped in the face with the reality of the post-pandemic inflationary costs, but we're seeing folks we usually see not driving up because they can't afford the gas to get here. Not only can they not be out and about, but they're not getting food, and we see it firsthand each week.”

What Welcome Table offers are meals that are developed very much from a nutritional standpoint, offering proteins, vegetables and carbohydrates developed with a nutritionist from the outset of the program. As community tastes have evolved, so too have the offerings with meal options now including meatless and porkless options and meals suitable for vegans and vegetarians.

“It can be burgers, chicken, pasta, shepherd's pie and one day when our oven failed, Doug and I did a mad scramble and went [to a local grocery store] and took every single cooked chicken they had, 25 cooked chickens and cut them all up,” says Collins-Mrakas. “Everybody was super happy because they got this roasted chicken dinner. We also have an incredible group of volunteer bakers who bring in treats each week, so guests will get their meal, a drink, bread, and then treats.”

Restaurants and businesses like Cobs Bread have also stepped up to help complement the meals.

But without further resources, it will be a struggle for Welcome Table to keep up with demand.

“We have had some visitors leaving Aurora and we don't know where they're going, but they're gone because they can't afford to live here anymore,” says Steele.

Adds Collins-Mrakas: “We've also seen more people who are clearly living in their cars.”

At the end of the day, however, both volunteers agree that they will continue with their ultimate mandate of “trying to support and elevate people to get back on track.”

“We're trying to inspire people to move up somehow and give them the tools to do so,” says Steele. “Last week, we had 155 visitors, which is way more manageable for us, but we don't know until they get here. If we had to serve 200 people this week, we could do it, but some people would be taking home frozen meals, which is better than not having anything. I know other agencies have run out and they have started rationing. We have a number of meals we limit people to unless we know their personal situation. We have one family with nine and if we didn't know their situation specifically we wouldn't give them nine meals because we're trying to help as many families as possible, but it is a reality.”

For more on Welcoming Arms, including Welcome Table, visit welcomingarms.ca.

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